

A "Manifesto from the Mountain"

In November 1987, the municipal government of Adjuntas, in the central mountain region of Puerto Rico, announced plans to build a new dump at the source of the Rio Tanama. There was little disputing the need for a new facility — the old dump, filled to overflowing, had become a source of contamination — but the proposed site evoked immediate protests from the residents of the area. The Rio Tanama provides the drinking water for nearly 250,000 people in Adjuntas and the adjoining towns of Utuado, Lares and Jayuya, as well as the urban center of Arecibo on the north coast. Placing the dump at the river's source would seriously endanger the quality of the entire region's drinking water.

Five community organizations banded together to oppose the dump. Their alarm was heightened by a case of poisoned drinking water along the coast, heavily contaminated by chemicals used in the pharmaceutical, petrochemical and electronics industries and seen as the cause of high rates of cancer and other illnesses in nearby communities.

Mobilizing the local community, the organizations raised two demands:

- That the Environmental Quality Board discard the location of the proposed Rio Tanama dump and,
- That the Aqueduct Authority and Department of Health take urgent and effective action to correct the crisis caused by the poisoned water.

Moving beyond these immediate defensive measures, they issued their "Manifesto from the Mountain," which presented a positive plan to protect the river from future threats. In the Manifesto the organizations proposed "that the Department of Natural Resources and the Planning Board declare as a zone of conservation the lateral margins of the Rio Tanama as well as the river basin of the mountainous sector... and that no activity which could affect the quality and quantity of these waters be allowed."

In February 1988, the Environmental Quality Board, bowing to popular pressure, ruled that the proposed location of the dump was unsuitable. At the same time, they refused to consider the proposal to declare a conservation zone in the region.

Rincon is closed — only to reemerge in another community or in another form; a toxic waste dump in Ponce, for example.

The total control exerted by the US military and multinational corporations over Puerto Rico's resources and future is at the economic and political heart of the nation's environmental problems. The environmental crisis on the island isn't simply a question of the party in power and the chance to vote for a new government every four years, but is fundamentally about Puerto Rico's right to self-determination.

Grappling with these issues, activists in Puerto Rico have come up with a new political synthesis, joining the struggle for the environment to the politics of national liberation and social transformation.

Ecology of National Liberation

The central cordillera, the rugged spine of mountain wilderness crossing the island, has been the nexus of the most fierce nationalist movements in Puerto Rican history. In recent years, the region has also been the focus of an effort linking the de-

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fense of Puerto Rico's natural resources to a movement for national liberation.

This area is home to the *Taller de Arte y Cultura* (the Art and Culture Workshop), which developed in 1980 as a grassroots response to the threat of copper mining posed by the 2020 plan. A framework for the economic development of Puerto Rico into the next century, the 2020 plan is a nightmare vision of US imperialism. It integrates the mining of copper in the central mountains with the establishment of a mineral refining industry on the coast. A series of 13 industrial parks devoted to pharmaceuticals, petrochemicals, electronics and metallurgy would be ringed with military bases.

In the central mountains, 17 open-pit copper mines, with one-mile-wide craters scoured 2-3000-foot deep, would be developed. The shockwaves from the daily detonation of twelve thousand pounds of dynamite would be felt over a five-mile radius, affecting the entire urban populations of Arecibo and Ponce. Since only two percent of the extracted material would be usable,

much of the remainder would be mixed with water and soil, sent down a huge pipeline and dumped in the Caribbean off Ponce. In addition to the devastating impacts on marine life, the mining activities would drain the island of five million gallons of water daily, depleting one of Puerto Rico's most threatened natural resources.

By exposing the documents of the 2020 Plan and explaining their significance, the Taller was able to link the environmental struggle against copper mining in Adjuntas to those of workers poisoned by toxic



Alexis Massol

chemicals in the petrochemical industry in Jabacuo, to the contamination of the island's water by toxic wastes from the pharmaceutical and electronics industries, to the plight of fishers whose livelihood was cut off when the US Navy insisted on using the island of Vieques as a target range for naval bombardment.

Advocacy in Adjuntas

The *Taller de Arte y Cultura* is located in the partially-restored hundred-year-old Casapueblo building in the center of Adjuntas. From its front rooms you can look out at the "Sleeping Giant" — the range of mountains resembling the profile of a reclining human being — and spot the dry patches where clear-cutting has begun to destroy the mountain's tropical forest cover.

"When we opened Casapueblo, we wanted to plant a tree in front to symbolize the restoration of our forests," said Tinte Deya, an English teacher who is secretary of the Taller. "So we had a tree-planting ceremony — it was a *maga*, the national tree of Puerto Rico — and invited people to bring earth from around the island. It was so moving; one after another, they would pour out the earth they had brought; one from the tomb of Don Pedro Albizu Campos; another from the birthplace of Don Juan Antonio Corretjer; another from Lares. All of our history is represented in that tree." [Campos was the President of the Nationalist Party from

1930-50; Corretjer, a national poet of Puerto Rico, served as the NP's Secretary-general; Lares is the site of the first rebellion against Spanish rule in the 1800s.]

For Alexis Massol, the civil engineer who is the director of the Taller, the struggle for the environment can not be separated from the question of Puerto Rican nationalism and the struggle for independence from US colonialism. Speaking of the growing grassroots environmental struggles around the island, Alexis noted, "People need to solve their immediate problems, yes. But they don't see the roots of these problems in the colonial situation. They mostly see it as a government or municipal problem. They don't immediately see imperialism and Puerto Rico's lack of power." However, he said, "Once they became involved in the struggle deeply, people began to see the sources and roots of these problems." In the process, apathy, fear, isolation, cultural and ideological manipulation, a sense of impotence and lack of self-esteem must all be broken down.

"People are afraid to express themselves," Alexis continued. "Puerto Rico is living in a system of terrorism and fear. There is a culture of silence in Puerto Rico. People are afraid to talk, to take a position on things. The colonial mentality is hard to break."

Through consistent organizing, the Taller was able to mount an effective challenge to the copper mining industry in the early 1980's. From 1981 to 1985, Taller members went door-to-door in Adjuntas, made hundreds of presentations, called community meetings and mobilizations, and finally took the campaign throughout the island and to the US. These presentations began to challenge the idea that environmental struggle was somehow the sole province of the scientific elite. More than four thousand signatures were gathered on petitions protesting the mining in the course of two major anti-mining tours. The fear and apathy of the community began to be broken.

As a result of these activities, the Puerto Rican government announced in August of 1986 that it would halt mining negotiations. Nonetheless, subsequent communication between the government and the Taller reveal that the mining plans are not dead and buried as the government claimed, but simply on hold. Thirty-seven thousand acres frozen for mining activities are still not available for other uses and 700 acres owned by Kennecott and AMAX have still not been bought back by the government, as promised. The Taller is currently planning a renewed campaign against

mining with the long-range goal of establishing a conservation zone in this region.

The affirmation of a revolutionary alternative — in this case the establishment of a conservation zone in the mountains — is a vital part of the Taller's practice. Alexis Massol commented on this aspect of their work: "When we began the mining campaign and started visiting the mining barrios, people would say, 'But you are *independentistas* and after the Puerto Rico government is gone, you will go ahead and exploit the mines yourselves.' So we had to take our principles from the people themselves — that we would never exploit the mines to the detriment of the environment. And we had to develop positive alternatives to the mining project."

The reforestation project, "Sembrando Esperanzas," means "Planting Hopes"



"Mother Island"

One such alternative is taking shape on eight acres of land in the barrio of Garzas-Junco. *Madre Isla* (Mother Island) is an agricultural self-sufficiency project begun by the Taller last year. The name, *Madre Isla*, comes from the title of a book written in 1898 by the great Puerto Rican educator and nationalist philosopher, Eugenio Maria de Hostos, in which he pointed to the need to cultivate the land in harmony with nature. On fertile agricultural land bordered by three rivers and Lake Garzas, members of the Taller have planted *cidra* — a tropical citrus fruit used in sweets and pastries — and are planning the cultivation of traditional Puerto Rican coffee. Once the agricultural project is fully productive, it will provide local employment and generate funds for the continued work of the Taller. In addition, the Taller has plans to establish a small coffee processing plant on the land. They currently buy local coffee

and use the services of a local processor to produce "Madre Isla" coffee on a small scale.

But to Alexis, *Madre Isla* is more than just an economic project and a source of funds. It is living proof that Puerto Rico has the human and natural resources to thrive as an independent nation. He envisions the day when brigades of *independentistas* will come to *Madre Isla* to help with the coffee and *cidra* harvest, integrate themselves with the Puerto Rican peasantry, and experience the cultural and spiritual values of working on the land. "My vision is that someday *Madre Isla* will be a kind of liberated territory in the middle of Puerto Rico, an example of what an independent Puerto Rico can be."

Innumerable twists and turns further along the mountain road, a local farmer has given the Taller three acres of hillside land to develop as a reforestation project. In 1985, the Taller organized a national activity in Adjuntas. From all over the island, people, including many children, came to Adjuntas, marched up the mountain and in ten minutes planted 300 trees along the hillside. Since then, other communities — Guanilla, Los Mirtos and Ponce — have held similar activities. Within the next two or three years, the Taller hopes to organize a national activity, with trees planted all around the island at the same moment.

In the midst of a national environmental and social crisis, the *Taller de Arte y Cultura* aspires to an independent and sustainable future for the Puerto Rican nation. Taking its name from Eugenio Maria de Hostos and reflecting a vision of Puerto Rico's possibilities, the Taller has named the reforestation project *Sembrando Esperanzas*, "Planting Hopes."

The experience of the *Taller de Arte y Cultura* in integrating ecological, cultural and spiritual values in the course of building a national liberation struggle has much to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between environmental and political struggle. The Taller hopes that environmentalists in the US can provide them with scientific, technical and organizing expertise, while publicizing their struggle within the US.

Jimmy Emerman, a former staff member with the *Natural Resources Defense Council*, serves on the editorial board of *Breakthrough* and has been active in the Puerto Rican solidarity movement for many years. In the summer of 1988, he worked in Puerto Rico as a fundraiser for the Taller de Arte y Cultura. To contact the Taller, write: Taller de Arte y Cultura, PO Box 704, Adjuntas, Puerto Rico 00601.